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Growth Through Agricultural Progress

STAFF PAPER

REVIEW OF USDA

BOARD OF EXAMINER SYSTEM

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REPORT ON REVIEW OF BOARD OF EXAMINER ACTIVITIES OF USDA

Background Facts and Opinions

As requested at the Philadelphia Personnel Policy Conference, a thorough review of USDA examining board activities was made. A detailed review of board reports and records furnished information of a statistical and financial nature. All field board secretaries furnished written comments concerning problems and suggestions. Personnel officers and Employment officers of the seven agencies using board facilities the most were interviewed for problems and suggestions. Two of the field board Executive Secretaries were invited to Washington and contributed valuable opinion and advice.

Problems and suggestions grouped themselves naturally into four categories as follows:

1. Organization
2. Responsibilities and Authorities
3. Operations
4. Financing

At the outset of the review very few persons had many complaints to make about examining board work. The executive secretaries and their staffs have been dedicated to their work and agency users of their service consistently recognize this. Their capacity for improvisation and "making things work" is well known. No one had ever systematically catalogued the trouble spots so that the whole picture could be seen. Many people felt something needed improvement, and had one or two suggestions to offer. When they were all added up it became an impressive list.

Recorded below is an abstract of the many problems and suggestions identified. These are grouped into the four categories previously mentioned, but are not otherwise edited. As can be seen, some of them are mutually exclusive, but are shown to indicate the range of feelings:

PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

Organization

1. Decentralize examining to the agencies.
2. Need board at San Francisco, primarily for Forest Service.
3. Need board in either first or second CSC region.

4. Fuzzy responsibilities organizationally - who really can consider business proposals to boards? Who are they working for?
5. Are boards as such necessary? Why appoint members to a board when executive secretary does the job?
6. Board work is unattractive to personnel specialists since it is a sidetrack, off-the-line, personnel activity.
7. Unlikely to get fully enthusiastic work when worker is employed by one agency but working for another, i.e., State Recruitment Representatives failed for this reason among others.
8. Could staff examining work more efficiently if it were an integral part of the personnel office?
9. Examining is the only personnel function so separated organizationally from personnel operations.
10. Central Board has been a fiction as such. Each member has been interested only in his agency's needs. Assign to OP clearly the authority now in the Board.
11. Could have combination of USDA boards and agency boards, if necessary.
12. Examining for common services positions doesn't have to be associated with our boards. Can be done in agency personnel offices as detached representatives of boards. Chicago AMS now does this detached from Milwaukee Board.
13. Examining function belongs close to appointing authority. Staffing planning is closely interrelated.
14. Agencies, if they had examining function, could plan, organize, staff and operate boards exactly where they need them. Would not have to break up their examining into arbitrary pieces that don't relate to needs.
15. Field boards have too many bosses--regional CSC offices, Central CSC, field USDA offices, Washington USDA offices, and Central USDA board. Confusing.

16. Make personnel officers members of examining boards.
17. Have agencies operate own central boards, but continue field USDA boards.
18. Let agencies using boards the most establish agency boards with USDA board to serve the rest.
19. Put field boards directly under OP as field offices.
20. Make more realistic selections for board members. Too many too badly informed of agency needs.
21. Use one or two field boards to maintain registers from examinations announced by all boards.
22. Administrative direction of Central and field boards needs strengthening. Too much technical direction, (5 sources), and not enough administrative direction.
23. Need periodic republication to all interested parties of board jurisdictions and authorities and responsibilities. Readjust as necessary.
24. Agency examining authority would provide "more aware board of examiners."
25. Make a study of organizations and procedures of boards and publicize so that best features can be adopted by all.
26. CSC regions reorganized to put Board Advisors and Inspectors together. Now cover both the boards and personnel office in one visit. Would be easier if we decentralize to agencies.

PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

Responsibilities and Authorities

1. Bureaus can best control national standardization vs. local control issue. Many complaints referred to lack of authority in field boards. As now constituted bureaus would be reluctant to grant more authority. The boards are too ill-informed of needs and too isolated from operations, etc., to exercise more authority responsibly.

2. CSC regions feel that Central Board control over Field boards is too tight. Among other things this made field board workload planning difficult.
3. Executive Secretary of Central Board has too little authority, or felt so, to deal effectively with agencies. Did not feel he had OP top authority and support. Board is left to scramble on its own.
4. Allow field boards to develop or modify qualification standards and/or rating schedules. Allow field boards to open and close examinations and to plan workload. Developing standards and schedules nationally takes too long.
5. Generally, no one wanted authority to examine for positions common to all the government.
6. Field panels be authorized to rate more examinations, not using Washington panel so much.
7. Responsibilities of field boards not clearly defined. Trouble with CSC regions concerning authority to issue TAPER authorities.
8. Some centralized examinations and rating panels could be decentralized.
9. More authority in bureaus to approve standards.
10. Office of Personnel, not Central Board, should review and approve standards, etc.

PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

Operations

1. A substantial travel budget for Central Board Executive Secretary to visit field boards and supply administrative direction.
2. A heavy proportion of examining is for positions predominantly used by one bureau only.

3. SLOWNESS - especially FSEE hiring. The long chain from the applicant to the appointment is causing the loss of many candidates.
4. Some boards have trouble getting quick action from rating panels.
5. Examining coverage for few-of-a-kind positions has been inadequate. Complaints that the system for these is still too cumbersome and slow. Too many TAPER authorities are issued.
6. Too many delays in processing the issuance of an examination.
7. Too much back flow of paper. For example:

An agency personnel office will work up an examination and send to board to announce. Applications come to the board, are routed to the agency to rate, are routed back to the board to go on the register, and are sent back to the agency with a certificate for an appointment. Applications for those not appointed go back to the board.
8. Boards don't comply with examination announcement schedule.
9. Not enough appointments are made from register. Either the examination was not needed or is not supplying a need.
10. Examination planning is poorly coordinated with needs and priorities can't be set.
11. Too long receiving standards in field boards.
12. Field boards are not good recruiting arms. Might focus contacts with colleges around boards.
13. Panel member training and efficiency is difficult to maintain since there is uncertainty as to who is responsible.
14. A meeting of field board executive secretaries is needed soon.
15. Boards need better information regarding agency needs and plans.

16. Strengthen communications between field boards and Central Board.
17. More information interchange between boards about "how-to-do-it."
18. Need more "on-the-spot" examining and hiring.
19. Periodic newsletter to field boards.
20. Need better coordination of field boards.
21. Boards should do rating instead of rating panels. Panels are costly and cumbersome.
22. Agencies need to anticipate needs better and prepare for "few-of-a-kind" examinations.
23. Centralize registers where the number of applicants is small.
24. Examination announcement distribution needs improvement. Don't always reach the candidates we want to see them reach.

PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

Financing

1. Two main comments: (1) Basic system is of questionable legality. Spending appropriations with no control. (2) System is also comparatively inflexible as to actual needs. Cumbersome billing procedure for individual examinations inhibits boards and agencies from undertaking work that they should.
2. Examining should be set up as a normal staff function and paid for accordingly.
3. Need COST studies on examining work so it could be budgeted for intelligently.
4. Agency boards would eliminate most financing problems. Also putting under OP as field offices would do this.
5. Set up as OP offices and collect from agencies for each examination.
6. A Capital Working Fund arrangement would work - but, go easy on accounting requirements.

Even though these problems and suggestions are grouped under four headings, it is apparent by study of them that an organizational thread runs through them all. This is to say that the very form of organization tends to create problems of responsibility and authority, operations and financing. For this reason a brief description of the current organization of our boards is necessary.

We have a Central Board in Washington and eight field boards located in Beltsville, Maryland; Upper Darby, Pennsylvania; Atlanta, Georgia; Fort Worth, Texas; Lincoln, Nebraska; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Denver, Colorado; and Portland, Oregon. The Central Board is staffed by employees on the payrolls of ARS and AMS primarily, with REA and others contributing. ARS staffs the Beltsville board, which incidentally furnished no services to other USDA agencies. (Hence, this is an agency board in all but name.) The SCS staffs the boards at Upper Darby, Fort Worth and Lincoln. The Forest Service staffs the boards at Atlanta and Milwaukee. The FHA staffs the board at Denver. The ASCS staffs the board at Portland. All of the boards bill using agencies for specific examination expenses at times. Most of the boards use some part-time clerical help on detail from interested agencies. The Central Board makes extensive use of clerical and technical help from various using agencies. Not very accurate records have been kept of the man hours of this kind of work performed.

Authority for approving examining qualification standards and rating specifications for USDA has been given to the Central Board. No authority has been delegated to the bureaus. The Office of Personnel is represented on the Central Board by the Director of Personnel who serves as chairman. Very little authority has been delegated to field boards, and none for standards or specifications. The Central Board staff is nominally under the administrative direction of the Central Board, but in fact receive little of this kind of supervision. Field board staffs are nominally under the administrative direction of their boards, but this too is seldom significant.

A Proposal

It is recommended that examining board functions be delegated to the bureaus to organize, staff and operate as their needs require. This arrangement would eliminate a great many of the problems inherent in our present USDA board concept.

As presently constituted the financing of our boards is cumbersome, inequitable and some say of doubtful legality. Changes in the pattern of use of service of the boards cannot be accounted for by changes in

financing without severe rupture. The criticism has been made that we don't even attempt necessary examining work because the awkwardness of financing inhibits. Delegation of examining authority to the bureaus will tend to eliminate these problems. At least the examining work will get the same kind of and amount of financial support that the rest of the personnel function gets.

Lines of authority and responsibility would be clarified by delegation to the bureaus. There would be no question about who was responsible for administrative direction. This latter point is probably the greatest weakness in our present system and is almost inescapable with USDA boards. There would be a sharp reduction in the number of sources of technical supervision directly affecting board operations. Reasons for centralization of authority in Washington would be bureau reasons and would be easily explained. Authority could be decentralized more easily because a bureau would be more likely to give such authority to one of their own field offices. Bureaus could hardly be criticized for not delegating more authority to our present boards. In the first place the bureaus don't have the authority to delegate. In the second place the field boards are too isolated from personnel operations to use more authority intelligibly. Only when a bureau has a field office with personnel management authorities and examining could more examining authority be decentralized.

The present board structure requires considerable coordination. Various Bureaus, the CSC, the Central Board, and the Office of Personnel all dealing directly with boards have caused coordination problems. Most of these problems would not exist if examining were a line personnel management function.

Perhaps most important of all, delegation to bureaus would highlight Office of Personnel responsibility for policy and control. As it is now, the Office of Personnel is so heavily concerned with detailed operating problems of boards, especially the Central Board, that their policy and control responsibilities get lost. Delegation to bureaus should be made with careful and specific limits set providing Office of Personnel policy control.

Bureau boards would be better able to adjust to workload and program changes. Putting the board staff in a line personnel office would make their slack time more available, and contrarily, would provide the slack time of other personnel functions for the examining workload. It seems inescapable that examining service would be faster when wholly within the control of a single bureau. Control over priorities would be no problem as it is now. Executive secretaries of our present boards are required to perform miracles of coordination when two or more bureaus need service quickly.

A current criticism relates to the excess backflow of paper between boards and bureau offices. Putting the examining in a line personnel office would sharply reduce this waste. All knowledgeable personnelists expect many fewer waste certificates if bureaus have their own boards. As it is now, bureaus ask for certificates not knowing much about the condition of the registers. After circularizing the eligibles certified the certificate is returned unused. A pure waste effort.

Workload planning could be improved. The present boards find it very difficult to estimate workload, depending as they do on the expectations of the many bureaus. Putting examining authority in the same office with recruitment and staffing responsibilities would permit intelligent planning.

Rating panels could be made more efficient. Current board secretaries might hesitate to call to the attention of a bureau poor or slow work by a rating panel member. Bureau examining offices would have no such hesitancy. There would be no question as to who was responsible for keeping the panel member well-trained and up-to-date in his work.

Recently the CSC in their regional offices have merged their inspection and board advisory services. Now an inspection team will review board functions at the same time they do the rest of the personnel operations. Putting our examining and personnel line operations together will facilitate this. We would truly have an integrated, total personnel management program. We would make better recruiters when the same people recruit and examine. Board work in a line personnel office would be more attractive to personnelists. As it is now, board work is outside the normal promotion lines and people fear being sidetracked into such work.

Incidentally, a decision to consolidate two or more bureau personnel offices would not make this proposal any less appropriate. The examining function belongs with the line personnel function wherever you choose to locate it organizationally.

Arguments Against Decentralization

It is undoubtedly apparent that the author of this report is convinced of the value of decentralization. Nevertheless, some points against the proposal should be made.

Decentralization would surely increase the number of examining locations. Consequently the workload of each would be less than we now have. This would tend to increase the cost per unit of work unless efficiency was increased. A greater number of examining locations would cause more confusion to the public as to where to apply.

Our present system insures nation-wide uniformity of standards by centralizing control. Many agencies prefer centralized Washington registers, and one board in Washington can serve them. USDA boards reduces the number of points to control and inspect.

Some people feel that by staffing and financing the Central Board properly it could then provide necessary administrative direction and coordination to improve our board operations.

Some suggest abolishing the Central Board concept, but keep USDA field boards. Without any significant delegation of authority, bureau field boards might be no improvement over USDA field boards.

Strong feelings were evidenced in recommending abolishing the "board" concept. Many felt board memberships were pointless, especially in USDA boards.

Statistical Summary

Included as "Exhibit A" is a set of statistics reflecting workload and costs for USDA boards in calendar year 1961. Cost figures reported do not include short time borrowed help in many cases. Only board staff and miscellaneous expense is included. The Central Board had a considerable amount of this kind of help and none was recorded. Perhaps the most striking aspect of these statistics is the dominant position of three agencies, the ARS, SCS, and FS. A few other agencies, AMS, FHA, ASCS and MOS made modest use of the boards and other USDA agencies hardly any. No panel member or board member costs are shown.

Each of the seven bureaus using board service significantly was asked to estimate the number and location of boards and their staffing needs if authority was delegated to them. These estimates follow:

- AMS - Two boards - Washington and Chicago
 Cost approximately \$12,000
- ARS - Five boards - Washington, Philadelphia,
 New Orleans, Minneapolis and Berkeley
 Cost \$50,000 to \$60,000
- ASCS - One board - Kansas City or Washington
 Cost approximately \$5,000

- FHA - One or two boards - Washington and/or Denver
 Cost approximately \$10,000 to \$15,000
- FS - Four boards - Washington, Atlanta, Denver
 and Portland
 Cost approximately \$40,000
- MOS - One board - Washington
 Cost approximately \$5,000
- SCS - Four boards - Washington, Salt Lake City,
 Fort Worth, and Champaign
 Cost approximately \$60,000

Follow-Up

It is recommended that a committee of agency Employment Officers be appointed to work with the Employment and Examining Division. This committee should devise procedures for and timing to break up present registers and redistribute them to agency boards. The agencies must arrange agreements for joint utilization of registers covering jobs common to more than one agency.

The Office of Personnel should supervise the preparation of a new master agreement with the Civil Service Commission concerning our examining work. The Office of Personnel should make clear to the agencies that personnel currently employed by boards must be absorbed. There should be no need for a reduction-in-force.

USDA AGENCIES BOARD SERVICE - WASHINGTON AND FIELD

Calendar Year 1961

Agency	Certificates	Appointments	303's
SCS	1,197	980	18
FS	815	1,389	363
ARS	683	1,160	485
AMS	222	298	141
*FHA	177	142	0
*FCIC	33	48	0
ASCS	86	53	2
MOS	112	83	11
*CEA	1	1	0
*OGC	3	1	0
#FAS	21	14	0
#INF.	7	3	5
#FES	5	5	0
#FCS	5	3	0
#REA	2	0	0
	<hr/> 3,369	<hr/> 4,180	<hr/> 1,025
Non-USDA	303	164	36
Service	<hr/> 3,672	<hr/> 4,344	<hr/> 1,061
*Field Boards only			
#Washington Board only			

BOARD WORKLOAD - FIELD

Calendar Year 1961

Board	Certificates Issued	Appointments	Applications Processed	303'S
Atlanta	327	327	1,745	137
Fort Worth	157	273	3,338	41
Upper Darby	316	269	2,800	37
Milwaukee	341	251	3,125	13
Beltsville	83	196	500	9
Denver	310	275	1,508	39
Lincoln	505	597	3,815	46
Portland	802	886	5,538	308
<hr/> TOTAL	<hr/> 2,841	<hr/> 3,074	<hr/> 22,269	<hr/> 630
<u>NON-USDA SERVICE</u>				
Atlanta	1	1		0
Fort Worth	7	4		0
Upper Darby	4	3		0
Milwaukee	38	20		1
Beltsville	20	27		1
Denver	30	16		0
Lincoln	52	33		0
Portland	43	26		8
	<hr/> 195	<hr/> 130		<hr/> 10
GRAND TOTAL	<hr/> 3,036	<hr/> 3,204		<hr/> 640

BUREAU ACTIVITY IN BOARDS (FIELD ONLY)

Calendar Year 1961

Bureau	Certificates	Appointments	303'S
SCS	1,173	972	15
FS	689*	984	353**
ARS	429	689	202
AMS	128	212	11
FHA	177	142	0
FCIC	33	48	0
ASCS	59	44	1
MOS	9	7	0
CEA	1	1	0
OGC	3	1	0
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	2,701	3,010	582
NON-USDA SERVICE	195	130	10
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	2,896	3,140	592

* One board unused, another only 3 - one 393 of total
** 247 in one board

USDA AGENCIES CENTRAL BOARD SERVICE

Calendar Year 1961

Agency	Certificates	Appointments	303'S
ARS	254	471	283
FS	126	495	10
AMS	94	86	130
MOS	103	76	11
ASCS	27	9	1
SCS	24	8	3
FAS	21	14	0
INF.	7	3	5
FES	5	5	0
FCS	5	3	0
REA	2	0	0
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	668	1,170	443
NON-USDA SERVICE	108	34	26
	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
	876	1,204	469

* Some belong to MOS

BOARDS COST

Calendar Year 1961

Board	Salaries	Miscellaneous
Milwaukee - FS	\$ 16,459.00	\$ 2,980.00
Beltsville - ARS	12,428.00	1,650.00
Atlanta - FS	16,730.00	2,785.00
Fort Worth - SCS	8,490.00	424.00
Denver - FHA	10,252.00	248.00
Lincoln - SCS	15,376.00	
Portland - ASCS	24,071.00	3,817.00
Upper Darby - SCS	12,840.00	
Central - AMS-ARS and others	19,490.00*	
	<hr/> \$136,146.00	<hr/> \$11,904.00
<p>Approximately 28 man years clerical and Executive Secretary time on all boards, Washington and Field.</p>		
<p>* Add \$724.00 FCA</p>		

